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ABSTRACT

The results of a survey of 180 part-time students' opinions on the standard of English in Hong Kong, on governmental efforts to improve the level of English in Hong Kong, and on how returning Hong Kong to China in 1997 will effect the standard of English are reported. The students were enrolled in a 6-year course in Chinese/English/Translation at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The questionnaire used in the survey included opportunities for both open and closed responses so that both broad and specific opinions would be reported. A clear majority, 55%, felt that the standard of English in Hong Kong is poor, while only 4% considered the level of English in Hong Kong to be good. Fifty-six percent of the respondents felt that the standard of English has declined. The most frequently offered evidence for this answer was the poorer command of English among younger colleagues of the respondents in work situations. The vast majority of the respondents, especially teachers, were unhappy about the English teaching situation (unpopular job, unmotivated students) in the schools. Over 50% of the respondents felt that each of the governmental proposals for improving the status of English in Hong Kong (the Expatriate Teachers Scheme, sending local teachers abroad, or a policy of "positive discrimination" favoring schools which move from English to Chinese as the medium of instruction) should be tried. Finally, a fairly general consensus was reached on the point that, although English will be needed for such activities as international business and tourism after 1997, the use and status of English in Hong Kong will decline. (DJD)

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THE DRAGON COMETH: 1997 AND THE ELT SCENE IN HONG KONG

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1. Introduction

As the date for the hand-over of Hong Kong to China approaches, there is much speculation on whether the standard of English will gradually be eroded or whether the end of the colonial era will inject new life into English language learning in Hong Kong. China certainly wants to inherit a bilingual community - in fact trilingual, since Cantonese is the language of Hong Kong, but China will want Mandarin to be taught in schools as a link language with the rest of the country. Further, it is in Hong Kong and China's interest to keep the standard of English high, since Hong Kong will be one of China's main trading centers with the international community, and will be one of the most important banking centers in Asia.

However, there are already signs that the standard of English in Hong Kong is slipping, and that if this is not arrested, then China will take over a territory in which the English standard is not good enough for international commercial purposes. Many of the big companies in Hong Kong - Swire, Hutchison, Shell, the Hong Kong Bank - have joined forces to form the Language Campaign for Business English. Dissatisfied with the results from the tertiary institutions, they have started in-house programs in English, to improve the commercial English of their employees.

The following paper describes a survey of part-time students' opinions on the standard of English in Hong Kong, on government efforts to improve it, and on how 1997 affects the issue.

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2. The students

The Chinese University of Hong Kong runs a six year part-time degree programme in Chinese/English/Translation. With an annual intake of 30 students, this offers a useful consultative body of about 180 young adults.

The majority of the students are in the 23 - 28 age range, with some older students in the 30's and 40's. They work in a variety of fields: teaching, civil service, business, nursing, police, and so on. Most of them do the degree course because their career prospects will be considerably enhanced by the possession of a university degree.

Lectures are conducted in the evenings between 6.30 and 9.30. There are three terms, running from September to June. The level of commitment of the students can be gauged from their persistence in attendance and study over a period of six years.

3. The questionnaire

A simple questionnaire was administered to the students of all six years of the part-time degree programme in November 1987. The questions were deliberately broad, since general impressions were sought rather than specific details. Some of the questions required a choice from alternatives (e.g. multiple choice options: Poor/Fair/Good), but opportunity was also given for a more general, open response to all questions. If the respondents felt the question was unclear or needed qualifying, they were invited to include their own qualifications in their open response.

The questions were as follows:

1. What do you think of the general standard of English in Hong Kong?

2. Do you think the general standard of English has declined?

Can you give reasons or evidence for your opinion?

3. Have you any comments on the situation of English language teaching/learning in Hong Kong schools? (You may comment from your past experience as a pupil, or from your present experience as a teacher/parent/concerned observer).

4. What do you think of the following three schemes proposed by government to improve the standard of English in schools?

A. The Expatriate Teachers Scheme. (81 expatriate, native-speakers of English will be placed as teachers in schools. The cost of the scheme will be 53 million HK\$.)

B. Sending local teachers abroad. (Selected local teachers of English will be sent to U.K. on a summer school to improve their English proficiency.)

C. The policy of "positive discrimination". (Schools which opt to move from English as the medium of instruction to Chinese as the medium of instruction will receive preferential treatment from the Department of Education in the form of extra English teachers and facilities, to ensure the maintenance of the standard of English).

5. Do you think Hong Kong really needs a high standard of English?

Japan has a very poor standard of English, yet is successful in international business.

6. Do you think English will be needed or used much in Hong Kong after 1997?

4. Students' responses

In reporting the responses, the results of multiple choice options will be given in percentages.

For the students' open answers, observations which were made by several respondents will be given in summary form, without quotation marks. In addition, to flesh out these general responses and to include comments which seemed particularly interesting or apt, some of the responses will be included verbatim. In such cases quotation marks will be used.

Question 1. What do you think of the general standard of English in Hong Kong?

Multiple choice options: Poor/Fair/Good/Don't know.

Results: Poor - 55%. Fair - 38%. Good - 4%. Don't know - 3%.

Open responses:

- In general Hong Kong's environment is not favourable to English language learning.
- "Chinese people feel embarrassed to speak English, for example in the MTR." (the MTR is Hong Kong's Underground rail system).
- Though there are plenty of opportunities to learn English e.g. through the English media, not many avail themselves of these opportunities.
- "Chinese people watching films in English just read the Chinese subtitles".
- Most jobs can be done without English.
- "There are not many real-life situations in which the majority of Chinese need to use English."

Question 2. Do you think the general standard of English has declined?

Can you give reasons or evidence for your opinion?

Multiple choice options: Yes/No/Don't know.

Results: Yes: 56%. No: 28%. Don't know: 16%.

Open responses.

Those favouring "Yes", i.e. that the standard of English has declined:

- Large business companies and government departments claim that in recent years new employees cannot function satisfactorily in English.
- "Many firms complain that even University graduates cannot write a decent letter of application."
- "I work in the administrative department of a government institution. My colleagues could write grammatical English ten years ago. Now most of them cannot."
- The enhanced status of the Chinese language has led to a reciprocal decline in the status of English.
- "People now want to learn Putonghua as much as English".
- People do not read as much in English as they used to because reading material in Chinese is widespread and cheaper.
- "English fictions are more expensive than Chinese ones".
- In the educational system in general there has been a shift of emphasis from language skills to subjects like maths, science or computer technology.

Those favouring "No", i.e. that the standard has not declined.

- English is more widespread. Compulsory education means that more people have some competence in English than hitherto.
- "Don't compare the elite of before with the mass of today."
- The public at large is more exposed to English now than before, e.g. through T.V., the cinema, tourists, home-helps.
- "Nowadays people respond with laughter in cinemas when an English film is being shown, even when there are no subtitles."
- "Many Chinese families now have a Philippine amah (maid) who teaches the children English."
- For those whose job involves the use of English the standard has probably improved rather than declined.

Question 3. Have you any comments on the situation of English language teaching/learning in Hong Kong schools. (You may comment from your past experience as a pupil, or from your present experience as a teacher/parent/concerned observer).

Open responses alone were required for this question.

The vast majority of respondents, especially the teachers, were highly critical of the schools situation. Among points raised were the following:

- With the introduction of compulsory education, the entry requirements for Colleges of Education have been lowered. Hence the standard of English proficiency among graduates from the Colleges of Education is lower.
- Class sizes are too big, which makes correction very burdensome.

- The abolition of the English exam at the end of Primary school (the SSPA, Secondary Schools Places Allocation) has caused pupils to stop taking English seriously.
- "English teaching has become the most difficult and nasty job in the school."
- The level of English by the end of Primary and Secondary school is extremely low for most pupils.
- "Many students do not know the English alphabet when they come to Form 1."
- "Nowadays most Form 5 graduates can't write a simple sentence."
- Since the level of English is so poor, the English School Certificate exam has had to be made easier.
- "Those who get an A now in School Cert. have a standard equivalent to those who got a C five or six years ago."
- "I have seen the recent exam papers of the School Cert. The questions are much simpler than years ago."
- The new communicative syllabus has not been the success it was hoped to be. Though it may benefit the best students, in general it has widened the gap between the good and the poor students. For the majority it has caused as many problems as it was meant to solve.
- "The communicative syllabus has led to no systematic practice in grammar and writing."
- "Students just memorize as usual, only now it is the different formulae for language functions."
- "The students play games in English class, but take little away."

Question 4. What do you think of the following three schemes proposed by government to improve the standard of English in schools?

A. The Expatriate Teachers Scheme.

Multiple choice options: For/ Against/ No opinion.

Results: For: 53%. Against: 38%. No opinion: 8%.

Open responses.

For the scheme:

- Native speakers will serve as clear role models in speech for pupils.
- Culturally appropriate examples come more naturally to native speakers.
- Since they cannot speak Chinese, pupils will be forced to use English when speaking with them.
- Chinese teachers also will have to speak to them in English. This will give the Chinese teachers practice and make it easier for them to use English when speaking to the pupils.

Against the scheme:

- It is too costly for too little return.
- "It is like slicing bread with a silver knife: the end product is still a slice of bread."
- They don't know the local problems and will have difficulty working with local teachers.
- "Such teachers usually dislike or ignore the restriction of a syllabus."
- Students will find foreigners less easy to communicate with than local teachers.

B. Sending local teachers abroad for summer school.

Multiple choice options: For/Against/Don't know.

Results: For: 53%. Against: 30%. Don't know: 17%.

Open responses:

For:

- It is better than nothing.
- "Every little helps."
- "If we can afford it, it is money well spent."

Against:

- Too costly for too little return. The money would be better spent on refresher courses at home.
- Too short a time to have any real effect.
- Problems of how to select teachers.

C. The policy of positive discrimination.

Multiple choice options: For/Against/Don't know.

Results: For: 54%. Against: 21%. Don't know: 25%.

Open responses.

For the policy:

- Any extra resources help.
- "Provided not too much is expected of it, the policy will have a definite effect."

- The scheme will enhance the position of both Chinese and English. -
- "Giving more teachers will underline the importance of English in the pupils' eyes."

Against the policy:

- Moving to Chinese medium will cause the standard of English to fall even further.
- Parents will resist moves towards Chinese medium education in Hong Kong, as they always have done, since they see English as the key to good job prospects.
- Headmasters too will be reluctant to move to Chinese medium since they will be afraid of losing their pupils.

Question 5. Do you think Hong Kong really needs a high standard of English? Japan has a very poor standard of English, yet is successful in international business.

Open responses only.

Most respondents agreed that the level of English in Japan is poor:

- "I would feel ashamed if the standard of English in Hong Kong was like that in Japan".
- "I work in IBM and have worked with Chase Manhattan. I know how time consuming it is to talk to a Japanese."

However, some did not agree:

- "The standard of English among Japanese who travel abroad on business is fairly high."

- "Japanese are poor only in spoken English. Their written English is quite good."

- "The younger generation in Japan know English better."

Some felt that Hong Kong would not suffer if the level of English there were to become like that in Japan:

- "The example of Japan shows that economic prosperity is more important than linguistic proficiency."

- "Like Japan we can use translators more."

- "Not everyone has to become a linguist: weakness in languages doesn't mean anything."

Many commented, occasionally with acerbity, that the situations of Hong Kong and Japan were so different that they could not be compared:

- Japan is much more powerful than Hong Kong in international trade.

- "Because of Japan's advanced state, it can insist on foreigners using its own language, and foreigners have to endure the low English standard of Japanese."

- Hong Kong is more culturally outward-looking than Japan.

- "Hong Kong is a cultural intersection between East and West, but Japan has got a strong national pride."

- "Hong Kong thinks we should learn about other cultures. Japan doesn't think so."

- "Hong Kong is a small place where survival depends on export trade; so it cannot take any risks to lose its customers."

- Hong Kong's historical links with Britain make it more natural that a good level of English should be maintained.

Question 6. Do you think English will be needed or used much in Hong Kong after 1997?

Open responses only.

Positive:

- English will be needed in international business, as Hong Kong increasingly becomes a trade gateway to China.
- It will be needed for tourism, and in the law.
- "The privileged few with good English will be at a distinct advantage."

Negative:

- Since English will no longer be an official language, it is bound to decline in importance and use.
- There will be a gradual take-over by Putonghua.
- "Already rich Hong Kong Chinese like Fung King Hey use an interpreter when doing business. This will happen more often as we approach 1997."

And a final significant comment:

- "All talk of 1997 just depresses me."

5. Comments and Discussion

Just as the reporting of the results has been necessarily brief and selective, though it is hoped representative, so the following comments will be short, but hopefully conducive to discussion and reflection.

5.1 The standard of English.

A clear majority, 55%, felt the standard was poor, with only 4% considering it was good. Considering the effort and expense which goes into English teaching in Hong Kong, this result must be rather disappointing, though not entirely unexpected.

There was general agreement among the respondents that the reasons for the poor standard of English are deep-rooted, general environment and motivation being most often quoted. Such factors are not easily changed.

It is problematic why there should be the embarrassment among Hong Kong Chinese about speaking English which many respondents mentioned, while there does not seem to be an equivalent embarrassment in, for example, mainland China. If the blame is laid on Hong Kong's colonial legacy, one could point to the Philippines where the American colonial legacy has not prevented the speaking of English with no embarrassment, and with a great deal more success than in Hong Kong.

5.2 On whether the general standard of English has declined.

That the standard of English in Hong Kong has declined is easy to say, but hard to prove. The variables in such a question would be extremely difficult to control. Despite the obvious unclarity of the concept "general standard of English", respondents by and large did not quarrel with the question, and the general lines of their replies were clear enough. 56% felt the standard had declined, the most frequently offered evidence for this being personal experience of poorer English among younger colleagues in the job situation.

An important point in this matter is clearly quality versus quantity. Many observed that while there may be poorer English in some

quarters where it was better in the past, there is a much more widespread use of English, albeit at a pretty low level.

Increased interest in Putonghua as 1997 approaches is more evident, and has already, in the opinion of several respondents, diluted enthusiasm for learning English. However, among those who actually use English at work and see its importance, the standard is thought to be as high as before and possibly even higher.

5.3 On English language teaching/learning in schools.

As usual there was a barrage of criticism on this score, particularly from teachers. English teaching has become a very unpopular job, as the increased length of compulsory education has led to less motivated pupils. Reports from teachers on the low level of English proficiency in some schools was rather depressing, prompting speculation about what actually goes on in some Primary school classes to produce such minimal results.

The communicative syllabus came in for a bit of a lambasting. It is hard to say whether the reason is indeed an ill-conceived syllabus or whether it is rather the teachers' inability to use such a syllabus that is the problem. Probably it is a bit of both. The increasing acceptance on a wide-world scale that communicative methodology does not preclude, but rather complements a grammatical framework, is pertinent to the issue.

5.4 On government schemes to improve English.

A. The expatriate teachers' scheme.

There have been many letters to the press on this topic, some complimentary, others hostile. While such letters can sometimes be an

index of public opinion, not too much weight should be given to them, since letters to the press may come from individuals with vested interests or from pressure groups which do not fairly represent the community at large. This is especially true of Hong Kong's largest-circulation English daily, the South China Morning Post, which allows letters under pseudonyms (though the editor must know the real name) and which allows letters to be phoned in.

The clear majority, 53%, in favour of giving the scheme a try, might be somewhat surprising to many Hong Kong teachers. However, objections to the scheme were also serious and may prove to be suasive, as time goes by and the project can be reviewed in the light of experience.

B. Sending local teachers abroad.

Again, a surprising 53% were in favour of this, despite the cost and short-term nature of the scheme. The general feeling was that anything along such lines would be worth trying.

C. The policy of positive discrimination.

Perhaps the most unexpected result of all was the 54% vote in favour of this policy as a workable way of bringing in more Chinese medium education, while at the same time preserving the level of English in schools. In view of the long history of parental coolness towards Chinese medium in schools, and of delay at education department level, it would be interesting and encouraging if this policy of positive discrimination were actually going to work. Objections have been voiced over many years to the educational ill-effects of English medium schooling for the majority. But where educational and linguistic arguments

have failed, perhaps social and political pressure, as 1997 nears, will have better results.

5.5 On Japan's level of English.

This question was included to prod the respondents into considering whether Hong Kong really does need a high level of English for all.

There were mixed opinions among the respondents, with some arguing that Hong Kong could well function more like Japan, using translators or a select group of language specialists. However, many commented that Hong Kong and Japan's situations were very different and did not bear comparison. An opinion commonly expressed was that in any case if Japan had good English, it would do even better business.

5.6 On English in Hong Kong after 1997.

There was fairly general consensus on this point, namely that while English would be needed for such things as international business and for tourism, there would be a decline in the use and status of English post 1997, as the government reverted to Putonghua-speaking Beijing and to local Cantonese-speaking administration.

6. Conclusion

The questionnaire covered a wide range of topics, any one of which could have been the subject of a separate study. However, the exercise was considered worthwhile in that it provided fresh evidence from an interesting group of respondents on a number of current critical questions in the area of ELT in Hong Kong. Though some of the answers were predictable enough for experienced Hong Kong teachers, others of the responses were surprising and challenging.